



Audubon CONNECTICUT

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GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING

TESTIMONY OF SANDY BRESLIN, DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS AUDUBON CONNECTICUT

IN OPPOSITION TO S.B. 839 AN ACT CONCERNING MERGERS AND CONSOLIDATIONS OF VARIOUS STATE AGENCIES.

Audubon Connecticut, the state organization of the National Audubon Society with more than 10,000 members statewide, works to protect birds, other wildlife and their habitats through education, science and conservation, and legislative advocacy for the benefit of people and the earth's biological diversity. Through our network of community-based nature centers, protected wildlife sanctuaries, and local volunteer Chapters, we seek to connect people with nature and inspire the next generation of conservationists.

Senator Slossberg, Representative Spallone, and members of the GAE Committee: thank you for the opportunity to comment today on the proposal to merge the Connecticut Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) into the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). On behalf of the more than 10,000 members of Audubon Connecticut statewide, I urge you to oppose this merger and maintain CEQ, the state's only independent watchdog for the environment, as an independent agency.

Why is CEQ so Important?

For more than 30 years, Connecticut's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) has been a watchdog monitoring the environmental agencies and health of our state, investigating citizen complaints about pollution and other environmental hazards, and reporting on our progress in making Connecticut a cleaner, safer place in which to live and raise a family.

The Council is composed of nine volunteer members and two paid staff members – one position was newly re-instated starting in January 2007. On an annual budget of approximately \$170,000, CEQ monitors and reports on the status of the state's environment each year, reviews and approves construction plans proposed by other state agencies, disseminates this information to the public via a monthly online publication - the Environmental Monitor - and investigates citizen complaints about violations of environmental statutes and regulations, providing the only such forum for the public in the state.

S.B. 839 eliminates the Council on Environmental Quality as an independent agency and merges it into the Department of Environmental Protection. DEP Commissioner Gina McCarthy testified before the Appropriations Committee earlier this year that should this happen, her agency would only be able to provide the Council with minimal staff support along the lines of arranging meetings and distributing emails. There would be no staff support for research or writing the Council's annual and special reports, or carrying out its other functions. **In essence, the CEQ as we know and value it would cease to exist.**

At a time when newspaper coverage of the environment is decreasing daily – there are now only three (3) reporters remaining in the state who write regularly about the environment left in the state – and with the DEP chronically underfunded, the cost-effective services provided by CEQ are more essential than ever.

Audubon Connecticut strongly urges the GAE Committee to maintain CEQ as an independent monitor of the state's environment.

A Leader on Key Issues:

In recent years, CEQ's reports and public outreach - - made possible only because the Council is an **independent agency** not staffed by DEP - - have brought to light significant issues and spurred key environmental legislation:

- Preserving open space
- Addressing the threat of invasive plant species
- Improving Connecticut's Environmental Policy Act
- Establishing the Face of Connecticut initiative
- Keeping protected lands protected with improved easement enforcement
- Highlighting DEP's dire funding situation
- Conserving inland wetland resources

In 1997, a special report by the Council showed how Connecticut lagged behind the region in preserving open space. The legislation and programs that resulted have greatly increased the number of acres of protected open space lands statewide. Data provided by CEQ also helped to spur the **Face of Connecticut** effort that integrates open space, farmland, historic preservation and brownfields advocacy.

In 2002, the Council analyzed the threat of invasive plants to Connecticut's natural landscape in a special report. In 2003, the General Assembly passed legislation on invasive plants that enacted many of CEQ's recommendations and create a coordinated statewide effort to eliminate this threat to native habitat. In December 2005, the Council issued a report on threats to Connecticut's preserved lands that resulted in the passage of P.A. 06-89 *An Act Concerning Encroachment on Open Space Lands* last session.

CEQ was also at the center of a successful effort in 2002 to improve the Connecticut Environmental Policy Act, a key state law requiring environmental review of state-funded projects. CEQ provided a forum where business, environmental and state agency

representatives could discuss problems and devise solutions in a constructive fashion. This work resulted in significant savings for the state. Changes to the Policy Act will result in some agencies preparing fewer environmental assessments for proposed projects. **Each assessment averages more than \$100,000 in cost, so reducing the number of reports saves more than CEQ's annual budget many times over!**

Improvements to the Connecticut Environmental Policy Act (CEPA) in 2002 also gave CEQ a new responsibility. **The Environmental Monitor** now goes electronically to every city and town in the state notifying them of details and deadlines associated with state projects undergoing CEPA review. Agencies can post their information on a web site created and maintained by CEQ staff.

CEQ also holds **public forums** around the state to hear citizen concerns and complaints. This outreach allows CEQ to identify emerging problems and relay them to appropriate agencies. **Without resorting to costly litigation, CEQ provides a venue for citizens to express concerns about Connecticut's environment.**

CEQ's Annual report has long been a reliable reference about the status of key environmental indicators for other state agencies including DEP, for legislators, municipal officials, journalists, academics and individuals. Information about each year's report can be accessed at the agency's web site:

<http://www.ct.gov/ceq/cwp/view.asp?a=986&q=248850>

The Council on Environmental Quality is one of the smartest and most cost-effective parts of our state government. Its services and data are invaluable in assessing the success - - or failure - - of our environmental initiatives and programs. It cannot serve this function from within the DEP. CEQ deserves to be fully funded and fully staffed for FY10-11 and beyond.

On behalf of the members of Audubon Connecticut, I strongly urge you to preserve the work of this vital agency.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on this important matter.